**War and the Media  
Press Freedom vs. Military Censorship**

News about every war, including the 2003 war in Iraq, involves gathering highly sensitive information. There has been considerable discussion about what information should—or should not—be released to the press in wartime. Is it important for people in a democracy to know what the government is doing? Can the media print or broadcast all information they receive? What press policy should the military use in wartime?

Throughout the Persian Gulf War of 1991, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein permitted only one foreign journalist to remain in Baghdad—CNN's veteran war correspondent Peter Arnett. Arnett had to obey Iraqi press-censorship rules. "From the beginning," Arnett later revealed, "I accepted the constraints that the Iraqis laid down. They said, 'Anything you do, you put on paper. We go over it, and we alter it. We change it if we wish to, and that's what you're going to use.'" Once the war began, the Iraqi government selected Arnett's reporting locations and monitored his interviews. As a result, many of Arnett's stories dwelled on bombing damage to civilian areas and the suffering of the Iraqi people.

Many Americans, including members of Congress and even fellow journalists, severely criticized Arnett for reporting material provided or censored by Iraq. But at the same time, hundreds of American reporters sent to Saudi Arabia had to deal with attempts by the U.S. military to control information.

**Press vs. Military**

During the Spanish-American War of 1898, reporters, if anything, led cheers for the military. Throughout World War I, journalists considered themselves part of the war effort, not independent observers. This pattern of press and military cooperation continued through World War II.

But starting with the Korean War and then Vietnam, the press took an increasingly independent and critical view of the military. In Vietnam, more than 2,000 accredited reporters roamed freely throughout battle zones interviewing ordinary soldiers rather than relying on the often rosy picture of the war presented by the Pentagon. There were few incidents of news stories endangering U.S. troops or military operations. But negative press accounts fueled anti-war feelings back home.

When the war in Southeast Asia finally ended, many in the military blamed the press for "losing Vietnam." Some Pentagon officials resolved to restrict press coverage of future American wars. In 1983, the Pentagon barred all journalists from the initial invasion of Grenada. Then in 1989, the Pentagon selected a dozen reporters to cover the invasion of Panama and restricted them to an airport in Panama until nearly all fighting ended.

**Policy #1: Press Pools**

When U.S. military units went to Saudi Arabia in the fall of 1990, about 1,000 journalists eventually joined them. The Pentagon set ground rules for the press. It authorized about a dozen "pools," of up to 18 reporters each, to visit U.S. military units in the field. News organizations selected reporters for each pool and military escorts accompanied them into the field. Pool reporters distributed their dispatches to their news organizations and to all other non-pool reporters who were required to remain in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, near the Kuwait border, or in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia.

The Pentagon accredited all American journalists and required them to observe the following battlefield press rules:

1. No reporters could visit any U.S. military unit or travel outside of Dhahran or Riyadh except in a press pool.
2. No pool was permitted in the field without an escort, usually a U.S. military public-affairs officer (PAO).
3. No interviews of U.S. military personnel were permitted without an escort present.
4. All pool dispatches must first pass through the "military security review system." (PAOs at ach pool location reviewed all dispatches and could delete or change any "military sensitive information." Reporters could appeal any censorship to the military pool coordinating office in Dhahran and then to the Pentagon.)
5. Violations of the above rules could result in arrest, detention, revocation of press credentials, and expulsion from the combat zone.

The Pentagon explained that these rules protected American troops, military operations, and the journalists themselves. One high Navy official, Rear Admiral John Bitoff, remarked: "There is a clear and present danger in today's instant-communications age, which may put our troops at risk. Our enemies are watching CNN-TV."

Most news organizations and journalists complied with the Pentagon's pool-and-review system. But the Pentagon heard many complaints—not about outright censorship, but about the military's strict control of the press. Reporters protested that escorts intimidated soldiers being interviewed, sometimes even speaking for them. The media objected when the military kept pool reporters from visiting scenes where Americans had been killed.

The press complained most often about delays in getting dispatches from the field through the military-review system. Many pool reporters writing late-breaking stories found their stories hopelessly out-of-date by the time they finally reached the United States. In some instances, stories were lost by the military-communications network.

Soon after the Pentagon's pool-and-review system went into operation, some news organizations filed a lawsuit charging the military with violating the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of the press. They argued that a free press should have access to a war zone, because the people have a right to know what is happening. In previous cases, the Supreme Court has refused to allow the press access to prisons, but has granted the press a right to cover trials. The right of access to a war zone has never been decided by the court.

The news organizations also contended that the Pentagon's press-reporting rules constituted an illegal "prior restraint" and therefore should be eliminated. Prior restraint occurs when the government censors material before its publication or broadcast. Except in rare cases, the First Amendment prohibits prior restraint. One exception recognizes the necessity of imposing government censorship when a "clear and present danger" threatens the country. In 1931 in the case of *Near v. Minnesota*, the U.S. Supreme Court cited an example of permissible military censorship: "No one would question but that a government might prevent . . . the publication of the sailing dates of transports or the location of troops." Before the lawsuit against Gulf War press restrictions could come before a judge, however, Desert Storm had ended.

During the war, a few reporters, called "unilaterals," broke away from the military's press pools and struck out on their own. Using cellular phones, they filed uncensored reports. These reports were not necessarily more critical of the military than pool reports. But they often seemed more realistic, because independent journalists usually reached battle scenes before pool reporters. Sometimes unilaterals were arrested, detained, and sent back to Dhahran by military authorities. But many managed to elude discovery, often with the help of American soldiers and officers.

When the ground war started, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney ordered a blackout of battlefield news. "We cannot permit the Iraqi forces to know anything about what we're doing," Cheney warned. But the blackout failed to hold as hundreds of reporters in Dhahran broke for the desert. An ABC News team even took its own satellite dish to broadcast directly from the battlefield. This gross violation of Pentagon press rules did not seem to matter because the United Nations' forces rolled to a dramatic victory in a ground war that lasted barely 100 hours.

**Criticism of the Rules**

After the fighting ended, many journalists continued to criticize the Pentagon's press rules. "They created a system of enormous control," wrote Clark Hoyt, Washington bureau chief for Knight-Ridder Newspapers. Others expressed fears that such a system would become the model for future American wars. Pentagon spokesman Pete Williams responded that "the press gave the American people the best war coverage they ever had."

The military responded, saying that control is necessary, especially in this age of rapid communications. Unlike World War II and Vietnam, the press can broadcast directly from the battlefield. Within seconds, the whole world—including the enemy—can see the report. Without controls, a reporter could unintentionally compromise U.S. forces. The military views its control over the press as a matter of life and death.

For the most part, Americans supported the military's control of the press during the Gulf War. In a Roper public-opinion poll after the Gulf War, 68 percent of those surveyed believed military control of the news was about right, 17 percent wanted more control, and only 13 percent wanted less.

But some advocates of free expression worry that military control of the press encroaches on our basic freedoms. They make the following arguments: The First Amendment's protection of the free press should not be thrown out whenever the military starts shooting. People in a free society should decide whether to go to war, whether to stay at war, and whether a war is just. To decide, people need information from a free press, not from a press controlled by the military. Otherwise, Americans might fight wars knowing only what the military wants them to know. And the military might not want people to know any bad news, anything critical of the military, or anything that might turn them against a war. Americans could then find themselves in the position of citizens in a military dictatorship—like Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

**Policy #2: Proposed Rules by News Media**

Several months after the Gulf War, a committee representing most of the nation's major news media issued a report stating that independent and uncensored reporting should be "the principal means of coverage" for all future wars and military operations. The report also proposed some battlefield press rules, including the following:

1. The Pentagon should accredit independent journalists, who must observe "a clear set of military security guidelines that protect U.S. forces and their operations." Violators of these guidelines should be expelled from the combat zone.
2. Press pools should be used only during the first 2-36 hours of any major military operation.
3. Reporters should have free access to all major military units.
4. The military should not monitor or interfere with press interviews or any part of the reporting process.
5. Written dispatches and pictures from the field should not be subject to any "military security review."

The press argued that these rules would ensure press freedom and offer security to our military forces.

**Policy #3: Embedded Journalists**

For the war in Iraq in 2003, the U.S. military devised new press rules. Responding to criticism that it did not allow journalists contact with fighting troops, the Pentagon's new rules allowed reporters to travel with U.S. military units as long as they followed strict rules. About 500 reporters (one-fifth of them from foreign countries) were placed, or embedded, in military units. They could remain with units until the end of the war or until they decided to leave. The Department of Defense stated the reasons behind this policy: "We need to tell the factual story—good or bad—before others seed the media with disinformation and distortions, as they most certainly will continue to do. Our people in the field need to tell our story—only commanders can ensure the media get to the story alongside the troops."

1. The media will be given access to operational combat missions, including mission preparation and debriefing, whenever possible. The media will be briefed as to what information may not be broadcast because of its sensitivity to military operations. For security reasons, commanders may impose news embargos and temporarily block communication transmissions.
2. The military cannot exclude reporters from combat areas to keep them safe. All reporters must sign an agreement waiving any legal action against the armed forces. Reporters are not allowed to carry firearms, use their own vehicles, or use lights at night (without permission).
3. Reporters can bring whatever communication equipment they want, but they must carry their own equipment. Reporters are encouraged to use lipstick and helmet-mounted cameras on combat missions.
4. The following information can be published or broadcast: approximate troop strength, approximate casualties, information and location of previous military targets and missions, names and hometowns of military units, service members' names and hometowns (with their permission).
5. The following cannot be published or broadcast because it could jeopardize operations and endanger lives: specific numbers of troops, aircraft, ships, and equipment; specific geographic location (unless released by the Department of Defense); information about future operations; rules of engagement (the circumstances under which a unit may fight).
6. Any violation of these rules will result in a reporter being sent away from the unit. These rules do not ban contact with reporters who are not embedded with the troops.

**Choose one to write a short response essay, using the format as all other writings in this class. Add one piece a rebuttal – make your argument, present the facts with detailed examples from the ready and then make one paragraph that presents the other side while still holding strong to your point of view!**

1. Is it possible to carry on a war with a free press? Why or why not?
2. Do you think the press should have access to war zones? Explain.

**For Discussion: (be prepared)**

1. What are the similarities and differences between the three sets of battlefield press rules discussed in the article?